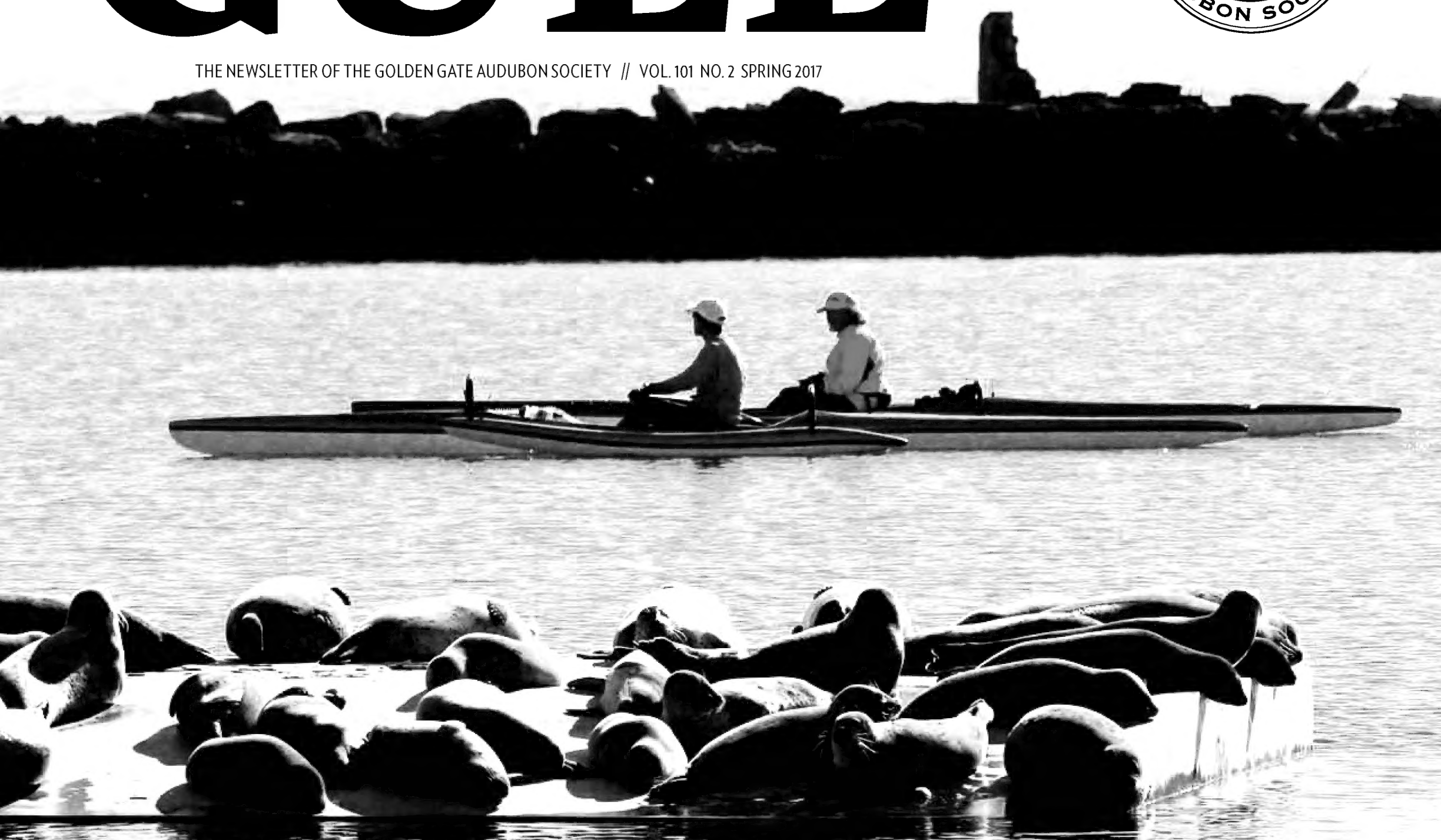


# THE GULL



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 101 NO. 2 SPRING 2017



## UPGRADED HOME FOR HARBOR SEALS

BY ILANA DEBARE

**T**hey're not birds...but they're better off today because of Golden Gate Audubon Society's advocacy. Harbor seals in Alameda, whose resting spot on a derelict dock was threatened by development, received a new floating haulout spot last summer. And they're loving it.

CONTINUED on page 5



Some members of the Albany shoreline bird survey team.

## CONSERVATION BY THE NUMBERS

BY CINDY MARGULIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**D**ata: it really can make all the difference. Diligently collecting and analyzing primary data is what Golden Gate Audubon Society citizen scientists have been doing for 100 years now...and it definitely counts!

First-hand scientific observations documented by diligent GGAS members inform our public advocacy efforts and shape the recommendations that we make to municipalities, land managers, and developers.

Our people are out there, using their eyes and their ears to survey local wildlife.

This data helps us track the success (or

shortfalls) of adaptive management in real time and over time. Land managers are almost always short on resources to conduct the kind of science done by our people. Monitoring work by Dan Murphy and Matt Zlatunich, for example, helped us make the case for increased protection of Snowy Plovers and shorebirds in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Sometimes local officials don't realize how special their local cohort of wildlife is. We bring delight and civic pride to communities when we share the insights gleaned from our surveys. In this issue, you'll read

about how Alameda residents monitoring local harbor seals led to effective advocacy for the seals' future.

Last year, our Oakland heron monitors gathered data that is helping inform plans to protect that heron population for the long term. Meanwhile, another GGAS team led by Pam Young and Steve Granholm conducted a year-long series of bird surveys in Albany and prepared a cogent report on *Birds of the Albany Shoreline* that will inform management of that area, slated to become part of McLaughlin Eastshore State Park.

And then there's the Christmas Bird Count, granddaddy of all citizen science efforts. Our Oakland CBC marshaled more field observers than any other CBC in 2014 and 2015, and with 302 participants we may have topped the list again in 2016. (Another 106 people signed up for our 2016 San Francisco CBC!)

This commitment to citizen science not only makes us proud, and helps protect our astonishing local wildlife, but continues a tradition we've upheld for an entire century...and counting.

\* \* \* \* \*

April is Birdathon month! I encourage everyone to use your personal networks and social media to help us fundraise in honor of our 100th anniversary. Try fundraising in multiples of 100—even if it's just a quarter for every year that GGAS has been protecting our local birdlife! You can find details at [goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017](http://goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017).

### NEWS BRIEFS

#### Oakland CBC Tallies 179 Species

The final report on our 2016 Oakland Christmas Bird Count is available: 302 participants found 179 species, near our recent average, and 116,055 birds, about 20,000 above recent averages. Wilson's Warbler on Bay Farm Island was chosen as Best Bird. Read the report at [goldengateaudubon.org/OakCBC-2016](http://goldengateaudubon.org/OakCBC-2016).

#### Burrowing Owls at Cesar Chavez Park

GGAS docents documented four Burrowing Owls wintering in Berkeley and Albany in 2016-17—two in Cesar Chavez Park, one in the nearby meadow, and one on the Albany plateau. Tragically, one Chavez owl was found dead but the cause of death could not be determined.

#### Bring 100 for 100

Celebrate GGAS's Centennial by helping us grow! The first 100 current members who recruit a friend to join GGAS will receive enamel pins with our Centennial logo—one for you and one for your friend. This is a great way to share your love of birding. See [goldengateaudubon.org/bring100-info](http://goldengateaudubon.org/bring100-info).

#### Learn from our Docents—Or Become One!

GGAS docents will help people spot nesting water birds at Lake Merritt every other Saturday morning this spring. Other docents will monitor downtown Oakland's nesting colony of herons and egrets. Look for our docents by the lake. Or sign up to become one! Email [volunteer@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:volunteer@goldengateaudubon.org).





## VOLLMER PEAK: BIRDING HOT SPOT

BY DENISE WIGHT

### LOCATION

Tilden Regional  
Park  
Berkeley

*Falcons,  
eagles,  
and other  
raptors  
may fly  
by at  
eye level.*

Vollmer Peak in Tilden Regional Park is one of the highest peaks in the Berkeley Hills, offering not just diverse birding but incredible views from the Farallones to the Sierra Nevada. Still, there are days when the fog is so thick you can barely make out the silhouettes of California Towhees and Song Sparrows foraging along the path directly in front of you.

Vollmer Peak holds a special place in my heart. I grew up in Orinda, looking up toward the peak. When my father was transferred to the San Francisco Bay Area from Chicago in 1963, he wrote to the family “back east” that we now lived below a mountain. Later we would laugh, knowing these were just hills to the locals.

Bird diversity is good on Vollmer Peak, with 151 species recorded on eBird. Habitat includes oak woodland, scrub, pines, eucalyptus, and various native and non-native plantings, with pastures to the east. When the Ohlone tribes inhabited this area, the habitat was treeless grasslands, maintained by regular burning for hunting and food-collecting purposes. Back then, we would not have found many of the tree- and scrub-loving species we see today.



(Clockwise from left) Lazuli Bunting in the fog at Vollmer Peak. View of Briones Reservoir from the peak. Western Tanager.

All photos by Denise Wight

Easiest access is from the “Trailhead Parking” lot beyond the Steam Trains. Listen and look for Song Sparrow, Wrentit, Purple Finch, and California Thrasher on the hillside directly above the parking lot. Red-breasted Nuthatches forage in the Douglas firs along the parking lot. Check them in winter for mixed-species foraging flocks. Some winters, Red Crossbills can be seen and heard in these trees, associating with Pine Siskins.

From the parking lot, head up the paved service road, enjoying the expansive view of the cities below. The pines and scrub along the flat portion of the ridge can produce a nice array of birds, including Lazuli Bunting in spring. Don’t forget to watch the sky: At this elevation, swifts, falcons, eagles, and other raptors may fly by at eye level.

I bring my Birding By Ear classes to Vollmer Peak year-round, but April and May is when bird songs really take off. We start at 5:30 a.m. in almost complete darkness, listening for any sounds around us. Foggy mornings mean less activity but birds remain present: I have seen a Lazuli Bunting in the fog, singing at eye-level within feet of me, its exquisite blue plumage glowing in the diffuse light.



Have a favorite birding site you’d like to share? Contact [idebare@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:idebare@goldengateaudubon.org).

# CENTENNIAL EXHIBIT INTRODUCES GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON TO NEW AUDIENCES

BY ILANA DEBARE

Scything bills of bright-orange avocets and the dramatic black-and-white breeding plumage of a Common Loon. Enthusiastic faces of hard-working volunteers. Vistas of shoreline habitat successfully preserved for wildlife....

These images have become ambassadors for Golden Gate Audubon Society's Centennial—sharing our story throughout 2017 in five locations on both sides of the Bay.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of GGAS's founding in 1917. Many organizations celebrate such landmarks with a gala dinner for members and donors. But the GGAS Board of Directors wanted a celebration that would be outward-looking and educational—introducing Audubon to people who may never have heard of us—and came up with the idea of a traveling museum exhibit.

To develop the exhibit concept, we connected with a JFK University graduate-level museum studies class, which adopted our Centennial Exhibit as their class project. Then, with pro bono design services from Airloom.space, we created 14 eight-foot-high, brightly colored panels that tell the story of “100 Years of Protecting Bay Area Birds.”

So far, the exhibit has appeared at the California State Building in San Francisco and in Tilden Regional Park in Berkeley. From May 24 through July 7, it will be at the Dalziel Building, adjacent to Oakland City Hall, and in July it will move to the Tides/Thoreau Center at the Presidio. Capping the year, it will be on display at Lindsey Wildlife Experience in Walnut Creek from October 3 through January 2, 2018.

We're holding festive launch receptions at each venue and inviting GGAS members in that particular city. At the California State Building, GGAS received a proclamation from Assemblyman Tony Thurmond and other Bay Area state legislators:

*“Whereas, founded on January 25, 1917, Golden Gate Audubon Society is one of the West Coast's most effective grassroots bird and wildlife conservation organizations...*



Visitors view the Centennial exhibit in San Francisco.

Ilana DeBare

*“Whereas, GGAS has been a (leader) in conserving S.F. Bay Area wildlife habitats, connecting people of all backgrounds with the natural world, and engaging Bay Area residents in the protection of our shared local environment...*

*“(We) recognize January 12, 2017 as Golden Gate Audubon Day.”*

At the Tilden Park reception, East Bay Regional Park District General Manager Robert Doyle praised GGAS's longstanding advocacy for natural spaces and wildlife:

“Audubon fought against development, even litigated, to protect shorebirds and habitat,” he said. “I can't tell you how important that is.... (and) I don't know of any other partner that has done more to get kids to the shoreline, to learn about birds and the plants you restored to nourish the birds.”

We hope you'll make time to visit the Centennial exhibit at one of its venues during 2017. Dates, hours, and addresses are online at [goldengateaudubon.org/ggas-exhibit](http://goldengateaudubon.org/ggas-exhibit). And bring your friends: The exhibit is a wonderful way to introduce them to Golden Gate Audubon and share the inspiring beauty of Bay Area birds.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Birdathon Awards Celebration

Oakland

Saturday, May 13, 3 to 6 p.m.

Whether or not you go on a Birdathon trip, join us for a fun afternoon celebrating the beauty of birds. Live rehabilitated raptors, bird art, live jazz, gourmet appetizers, and wine. And of course Birdathon stories and awards! For details and tickets, see [goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017-celebration](http://goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017-celebration).

### Return of the Terns

Crab Cove, Alameda

Saturday, June 17

Take advantage of the one opportunity each year to view the nesting colony of endangered Least Terns at Alameda Point. Guided bus tour to see terns and chicks, plus presentations on the terns and shoreline birding. Advance registration through East Bay Regional Parks. See <http://bit.ly/returnoftheterns2017>.

### Restore Habitat for Wildlife

Multiple sites

Multiple dates

Volunteer to restore habitat with us! First Saturdays at Pier 94 in S.F., third Saturdays at MLK Jr. Shoreline in Oakland, fourth Saturdays at North Lake in Golden Gate Park. Plus April 8 at Land's End, and more! Adults and kids welcome. See [goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer](http://goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer) to learn more.





Mark Klein

Brown Pelicans enjoy the new haulout too.

#### HARBOR SEALS CONTINUED from page 1

“This winter, we’ve often seen over 50 seals on the new haulout,” said GGAS Executive Director Cindy Margulis. “We’ve consistently had higher numbers than on the old dock, even though that old dock was bigger.”

Harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) can be distinguished from other pinnipeds by their spotted coats and their lack of ear flaps. While they may travel several miles out to sea in search of fish, they like to return to familiar resting sites in harbors and estuaries. They spend about half their time “hauled out” of the water to rest and moult. But they are much shyer of humans and generally congregate in smaller groups than the California sea lions that delight tourists at San Francisco’s Pier 39.

In Alameda, a colony of harbor seals had been hauling out for years on an abandoned wooden dock between Encinal Beach and the U.S.S. Hornet. The haulout typically drew eight to 15 seals on the dock, with a one-time high of 52.

But in 2016, the haulout faced imminent destruction when the Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA) negotiated a lease with Alameda city officials to build a new headquarters and ferry maintenance terminal.

Golden Gate Audubon joined local seal

*This is an example of how bringing all stakeholders together can create a win for everyone.*

lovers before the Alameda City Council when the lease was up for consideration. We pointed out that harbor seal habitat is protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and recommended that the city require WETA to provide a comparable replacement haul-out nearby with consultation from a reputable marine biologist.

Surprised to learn about the seal population and its fan club, the City Council placed a rider on the lease agreement that required \$100,000 in escrow for mitigating the project’s impacts on seals.

With input from Golden Gate Audubon, WETA hired a leading harbor seal biologist—Dr. James Harvey of Moss Landing Marine Labs—to identify a good location and design a haul-out. Seal advocates and GGAS’s Margulis met with the biologist to scout locations and discuss design considerations. In June 2016, a new float—a concrete platform with a ramp resting on buoyant materials—was installed.

The floating platform was initially placed next to the old dock to give the seals time to acclimate to its presence. Gradually it was moved further away from the construction zone, and the old dock was removed. A

team of local citizen-scientists, led by Mark Klein, monitored the seals’ response.

“The first day we had one seal observed on the new dock, the second day two, the third day three, and by the fourth day, seven were using it,” said Margulis.

Winter typically brings more harbor seals into San Francisco Bay. Between rain storms this January, the number on the haulout rose above 50 on a routine basis—with a high of over 70.

And the seals were not the only beneficiaries. During the fall, the floating dock was covered from edge to edge with roosting Brown Pelicans. Other species observed there include cormorants, egrets, herons, terns, and Black Oystercatchers.

“This is an example of how bringing all stakeholders together can create a win for everyone,” Margulis said. “The seals got to stay in Alameda. The WETA workers will love watching the seals from their new offices. Alameda residents can observe the seals and pelicans from the Bay Trail along the shore....Nobody had ever purposefully built a haulout to attract harbor seals. Our success here provides a model to help harbor seals in other locations.”



Tony Brake

Osprey pair at nest platform.

## OSPREYS IN SAN FRANCISCO BAY

TONY BRAKE

LOCATION / DATE

**San Francisco**  
Thursday, April 20  
6:30 p.m. refreshments  
7 p.m. program

The last decade has seen a remarkably rapid expansion of nesting Ospreys along the San Francisco Bay shoreline. With an initial nest sighting in Vallejo in 1990, numbers started climbing in 2003. An Osprey nest census was launched in 2012, and last year a total of 42 pairs were observed, with 15 successful nests producing 30 fledglings. Nests are concentrated mostly along the Mare Island Strait and Richmond shoreline. Nearly all were built on human-made structures such as light towers, cranes, and utility poles. Many are on derelict structures that may collapse or be removed, presenting a significant conservation challenge. A positive development is that in 2016, nine nests were on artificial platforms or modified utility poles.

Tony Brake is a retired research scientist in molecular neuroscience from U.C. San Francisco. He has been a volunteer with the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory since 2003, and with the Golden Eagle Monitoring Team for the East Bay Regional Park District.

### THERE'S STILL TIME TO SIGN UP FOR BIRDATHON 2017!

Birdathon, taking place throughout April, is our biggest and most FUN fundraiser of the year. Sign up for a unique behind-the-scenes tour or special bird walk! Everyone who raises or donates \$100 will receive a Birdathon 2017 t-shirt. Raising \$500 gives you free admission to the Birdathon Awards Celebration on May 13. For trips and info, see [goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017](http://goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon2017).



## LEAST TERNS IN ALAMEDA

SUSAN EUING

*Re-Scheduled from March*

LOCATION / DATE

**Berkeley**  
Thursday, May 18  
6:30 p.m. refreshments  
7 p.m. program

California Least Terns—an endangered species weighing under 1.6 ounces—have nested on the tarmac of the former Alameda Naval Air Station for over 40 years. Managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and now owned by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, this has become the most productive Least Tern breeding colony on the West Coast.

Susan Euing is the USFWS biologist who manages the Alameda Least Tern colony. She will share fascinating information about these amazing birds and the surprisingly uplifting history of how Golden Gate Audubon's citizen scientists and volunteers have aided in the decades-long recovery effort.



Rick Lewis

## EGRETS AND MORE AT AUDUBON CANYON RANCH

JOHN P. KELLY

LOCATION / DATE

**San Francisco**  
Thursday, June 15  
6:30 p.m. refreshments  
7 p.m. program

After a long recovery from intensive hunting and habitat loss, herons and egrets today are symbols of wetland health and conservation. Learn about the lives of herons and egrets, with insights from ongoing studies at Audubon Canyon Ranch, established with Golden Gate Audubon's help in the early 1960s. John will also discuss shorebird responses to tidal marsh restoration and the dependence of wintering water birds on Pacific herring.

John Kelly has been studying heron and egrets throughout the Bay Area for nearly 30 years. As ACR's Director of Conservation Science, he manages their Cypress Grove Research Center on Tomales Bay.



Keith Carver

**San Francisco:** First Unitarian Universalist Church and Center, 1187 Franklin Street (at Geary). Public transit, street parking, and parking in a lot for a fee are available. Directions: Visit [uusf.org/contact](http://uusf.org/contact), and use the Map It! link on the left.

**Berkeley:** Northbrae Community Church, 941 The Alameda (between Solano and Marin). Directions: [northbrae.org/contact--find-us.html](http://northbrae.org/contact--find-us.html).



DONATIONS

Thank you for your generous donations to support our many conservation, education, and member activities!  
December 1, 2016 through February 28, 2017

GOLDEN EAGLE (\$1000 or more)

Carol Baxter, Diane & Tom Bennett, Mary Betlach, Linda & Bob Carloni, Katherine Erickson, Patricia Greene, Lynn & Jeffrey Horowitz, Harold Kirker, John Nelson, Jacqueline Smalley

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Tulsa and Simone Fund  
Worldwide Small Change Foundation

THE GULL AND WEBSITE

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## 2 GGAS Surveys Albany Birds

Golden Gate Audubon volunteers partnered with Citizens for Eastshore Parks to document Albany shoreline birds.

## 3 Birding Hotspot: Vollmer Peak

The highest spot in the East Bay hills provides dramatic views as well as good birding opportunities.

## 4 Centennial Exhibit Hits the Road

Our Centennial exhibit has so far visited downtown San Francisco and Tilden Park, with three more venues to come.

## BACKYARD BIRDER



Miya Lucas

Sora at Las Gallinas Ponds.

## THE SECRETIVE SORA

BY MIYA LUCAS

**S**ora is the name of a fictional character in a Japanese video game. Sometimes trying to view a Sora rail is so challenging that you may feel like it is a fictional character as well.

Soras are secretive and stealthy. I enjoy hearing the Sora's call and song, and occasionally seeing the actual bird, at Las Gallinas Sanitary Ponds in San Rafael. We in the Bay Area are fortunate to

live in one of just two regions—northern/central California, and Arizona/New Mexico—that are home to Soras year-round. Their preferred habitat is freshwater marshlands, usually with a water depth of 12 to 20 inches.

“Thin as a rail”: The phrase originally referred to a fence or a bar. However, it would be an appropriate phrase for a Sora as well. Although the Sora's length is 8 to 10 inches, it can compress its chest wall to a width of 1.5 inches, allowing it to walk in and out of thick-growing reeds or cattails. If threatened, it sometimes dives for cover under water and all you can see is its yellow beak sticking out.

I especially enjoy hearing the Sora's call. It reminds me of the childhood game of tag, like a child's high, sing-song voice shouting...yourit! yourit! yourit! They also have a loud, fast horse-like whinny that slows down so you can hear each note.

Sora courtship behavior has three stages. The first stage is visual—what I call the flirty stage. Male and female stand near each other, watching and being watched. The second stage continues the watching but adds preening before the other Sora. If all goes well, in two to four weeks, the Soras move on to preening each other. Soon afterwards, copulation occurs.

Both male and female build the nest. They actually make several nests—one for laying their eggs, and additional ones as resting platforms or feeding sites for young birds. Their nests include a “ramp” that allows the young birds to run up and down into the water.

As secretive as Soras are, it's well worth the effort to try to see them. Scan the edge of a marsh at water level. If you're patient and persistent, you will be rewarded.